

YOUR
LETTERS

MAILBOX

This month you're hot and bothered about notebooks burning holes in your legs and burning optical media, but one reader needs help working up a sweat in more conventional ways

★ Star Letter Feeling the burn



In *Shopper* February 2007, Tony Fisher suggested burning optical media as a way of permanently destroying the data ('Another burning issue', *Mailbox*). This poses many dangers and shouldn't be encouraged.

The plastic in CDs and DVDs is polycarbonate. This burns at a fairly high temperature and can be burnt safely in an industrial incinerator without producing noxious gasses. However, setting some discs alight in the back garden is a different matter. Without a controlled stream of air, the polycarbonate produces dense black smoke, comprising a soup of nasty hydrocarbons that is bad for your washing and worse for your lungs.

Another danger with burning optical media at home is that polycarbonate melts into a sticky gel. Imagine getting sticky glue on your hands. It's a pain to get off and takes ages to do so, sticking like mad and pulling away in stringy blobs. Replace the glue with molten polycarbonate and the damage to flesh would be terrible.

Domestic shredders of optical media are easily obtainable and polycarbonate can be recycled. Perhaps *Shopper* knows of a charity that takes shredded CDs and DVDs for recycling?

Alan Thomas

Recycling CDs is a complicated business, and it's trickier if the disc has been shredded. Some charities accept donations of music and software CDs to recycle by selling them, but they refuse data discs and other items (such as computer magazine cover discs) that they can't sell.

There are commercial companies that provide CD recycling services. Generally speaking, these companies deal only in huge quantities of recyclable materials and won't handle household waste. For example, one company we talked to takes a minimum of 500kg of CDs.

It is possible your local council will offer to recycle CDs, but the council websites we've seen usually refer potential recyclers to third-party companies, and mainly to Polymer Reprocessors Limited, which handles any number of CDs you send in. A spokesperson for the company told us it will handle any amount of discs, and that on any one day it might receive a pack of 12 CDs sent in by a household and a one-tonne shipment from the music industry.

If you want to help keep the UK's landfills free of CDs and DVDs, you can send your discs to Polymer Reprocessors Limited, Reeds Lane, Moreton, Wirral, CH46 1DW. Mark your envelope 'For recycling'. Non-shredded discs are preferred.



◀ Seeing as there are only so many novelty coasters that you can use, Polymer Reprocessors Limited disposes of unwanted CDs and DVDs

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REAL JOURNALISM



With all the blogs and podcasts out there, does it make any sense for TV news broadcasts and even computer magazines to keep going? Even the Queen has her own podcast now, though I doubt she'll update it more than once a year.

What do magazines such as *Computer Shopper* bring to the party, when I can get loads of reviews

from the internet and read about how to fix my computer on websites too? I don't even read a newspaper any more because it's all on the internet.

With the internet you get real journalism – people's views are unedited and not biased like some TV channels and magazines I could mention. If you want video clips, you can use YouTube and see the things the government doesn't want you to see.

R Ackley

The internet allows anyone to publish news and comment about anything, subject to certain local laws. This means you can get your news about the political situation in Iraq from a multinational news agency or from a resident of Baghdad. You can also read commentaries written by people based anywhere in the world, each with a different level of understanding about the subject. It is up to the reader to decide who to trust.

If you want to find out about Windows Vista, there are plenty of articles and previews of this new and much-awaited operating system from Microsoft. Some have been written by fans of Microsoft, others by die-hard Linux and Mac users. We would humbly suggest that none of these groups is likely to give a balanced view.

Major news outlets will cover the launch of Vista when it becomes available to consumers over the coming weeks. These outlets are not staffed by PC experts and most of their viewers, readers or listeners are probably not interested in technical details anyway. If you want detailed, unbiased and accurate coverage, you will probably turn to serious, professionally run and impartial computer magazines. You might well find alternatives on the internet, or you might even read our own website if you prefer the online experience.

Computer Shopper brings with it many years of experience, helping its readers make sensible buying decisions and learn more about their computers and how to use them. We are not blinded by superfluous details, and we are not partisan when it comes to choosing the right kit for the job. For example, we know most home and business users have to use Windows, which is why we give most of our coverage to this operating system. However, people who want to run their own web servers and other internet systems can read our regular *Linux Expert* section. If you need further evidence of our range, we reviewed an Apple 24in iMac in *What's New, Shopper* January 2007, and we plan to review the new MacBook next month.

Computer Shopper has its own website and it is unlikely you'll find many others out there that can rival it for its vast archive of consistently tested products. You might be able to find a review of some gadget on a personal blog, but does that blogger have any experience of other, similar gadgets? If he doesn't, how does that affect your opinion of his opinion?

While we don't condemn all blogs and podcasts out of hand, many of those we've seen don't exhibit the same levels of editorial quality that you'll find on a professional website or in a magazine. But then, of course, we would say that, wouldn't we?

DRUM ROLL



I've just replaced my Brother mono laser printer, not because it was faulty but because it was cheaper to buy a new printer than to replace the drum unit of my old printer.

A new drum costs £100 and apparently the manufacturer recommends buying a new toner cartridge at the same time, which comes to another £40. The total cost of £140 is twice as much as the new mono laser printer I bought from the same manufacturer. For £70 I got a



▲ Many consumers now find it is cheaper to buy a new printer rather than replace a drum or toner

newer model that prints twice as fast, comes complete with drum unit and toner cartridge and a new 12-month warranty.

What's the point of replacing a drum unit when it's cheaper to buy a complete, newly warranted printer? I appreciate that manufacturers make their profits from consumables, but this is ridiculous. While I was pleased to be saving £70, it's not very environmentally friendly. I gave my old printer to a recycling charity, but that's not the point.

I suspect manufacturers are making losses on new printers. I would rather they priced the consumables cheaper, even if that meant charging more for the printers. It would be very helpful to many of your readers if you could print the costs of the associated printer consumables in your printer reviews.

Simon Whaley

Rather than print the prices of individual consumables, such as drums and toner, we publish the running costs of each printer we review. These figures incorporate all the maths necessary to work out how much consumables will cost you over the life of the printer. This provides a more comparable figure than if we simply listed all the different consumables and their respective prices.

Our Labs tests provide the greatest detail. Lines in the table tell you how much you'll spend on toner, ink, drums and any other consumable, all in one handy per-page figure. We've assumed you'll buy the manufacturer's own-branded

products and that, if there is a choice of capacity, you'll buy the biggest available to get the best value. We've picked the lowest consumables prices we can find to work out if a printer is economical to run over a period of time. When we uncover particularly good or bad value, we'll draw attention to this in the review itself. You can find more details about our figures online at www.computershopper.co.uk/howwetest.

There is no doubt that printer manufacturers would adopt more honest pricing if consumers were happy to pay big sums upfront. However, it seems we are happier to spread the cost of owning a printer by buying cheap and then shelling out for expensive ink and toner over a period of time.

There's a further point to bear in mind when considering whether to refill or replace a printer. New printers often come with 'starter' toner cartridges of reduced capacity. Where this is the case, our running cost figures take the shortened life into account.

OPEN OR SHUT CASE?



The case of a PC is not there just to hold everything together; it functions to screen it and so make it compatible with other electronic equipment. If, as you suggest in *PC Builder, Shopper* February 2007, you cut holes in the case, run leads to lights or fit a plastic case, the computer may radiate interference. It also becomes more susceptible to interference from any local radio transmitter or other nearby sources of electromagnetic waves.



▲ Think twice before hacking lumps out of your computer's case



WRITE IN AND WIN!

HP has kindly agreed to provide its award-winning HP DeskJet 5940 inkjet printer to this month's Star Letter writer. This smart-looking colour printer will do a good job of just about any task you throw at it, and it will do it fast.

It can take a six-ink cartridge for printing realistic photos and the cost per page is one of the lowest we've seen. With plenty of strengths and no major weaknesses, the 5940 has been on our 'Also consider...' list since its first review. It's the perfect all-rounder, and that's why we awarded it Best Inkjet Printer in our 2006 awards.



PLUS!

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It may even crash when the thermostat in the fridge opens or closes.

Electromagnetic Compatibility (EMC) is controlled by law, and new computers have to pass tests to ensure they comply. A computer with a modified case, quite apart from being a source of irritation to those of us who try to listen to weak radio signals, is probably illegal. Please do not encourage such modding.

Harry Leeming

PC manufacturers have to ensure that their products don't interfere with other electrical equipment. The CE mark on a PC indicates that the equipment conforms to the necessary European Union (EU) directives, including the European Union Directive on EMC. This directive is aimed at manufacturers, though, and not hobbyists. If a PC company cut a hole in a PC case and sold it without the correct testing, it could get into trouble. A *Shopper* reader who takes a hacksaw to a PC case does not face the same regulations.

The Electromagnetic Compatibility Regulations 2005 explicitly exclude second-hand apparatus, so you could probably sell on your modified PC, too, as long as you made it clear that it was not new. Please note this is not legal advice to budding entrepreneurs.

It is legal to run a PC you have modified yourself, whether this modification is the addition of flashing lights, the removal of lumps out of the case or even the removal of the case completely. Those readers who regularly run their PCs with the lids off can sleep easy in the knowledge that the EMC police are not out to get them and lock them up.

That said, your point about interference causing instability is an interesting one. Anybody who makes significant changes to their case should consider electromagnetic interference as part of their troubleshooting process, particularly if nearby mobile phones experience problems maintaining a signal or turning on the vacuum cleaner causes a Windows crash.

HOT LAPS



I read *Shopper* January 2007 and found much to amuse and inform, as usual. However, I found only one reference to how hot notebooks can get. As a user of notebooks, desktops and PDAs, I find that using a notebook on your lap for more than 10 to 15 minutes is not comfortable, not even for word processing.



▲ The only hot legs Maud experienced was when she listened to Rod Stewart

Maybe manufacturers don't want us to know how hot they can get.

Roy

The latest high-powered notebooks have a tendency to get uncomfortably warm after a while. We've even read a report claiming that male users risk reducing their sperm count if they use a notebook balanced on their thighs. The study claimed that the lowered sperm count was due to both local heating and the posture of the people being monitored. Scrotal temperature even rose by 2.1°C when the subjects sat balancing an inactive notebook.

It is likely that, as long as you don't continue using a notebook beyond the point of minor discomfort, your health will not suffer. But what if you need to use your computer for extended periods of time? There are several solutions, some more obvious than others.

Many people use notebooks instead of desktop PCs at home and in the office, and support their computers on desks and tables instead of their laps. For this scenario, you can buy cooling devices that support the notebook on a frame and blow air over its under surface. The angle of the frame has the additional bonus of improving the angle of the keyboard. One such device is the LapCool4 Notebook Cooler from www.maplin.co.uk, which costs £19.99 including VAT.

If you want to sit on the sofa while playing a game or writing up a document, you'll still want to base your computer on or around your lap. We've found that an easy and economical option is to use a beanbag lap tray. Our preference is the £22 Tartan Lap Tray from

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www.houseoftartan.co.uk. For bedtime use, check out the £16 Adjustable Wooden Bed Tray from www.benefitsnowshop.co.uk.

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION



This year I intend to turn over a new leaf and spend less time in front of the computer and more time getting fit. At the risk of sounding like I am missing the point, I would like to enlist the help of my PC. Are there any gadgets or software available either to keep me motivated or actually manage my training?

Gareth Wright

If you want to put some time into setting up your training schedule, you could use a spreadsheet such as Excel to monitor your running times or weight repetitions or even your golf handicap. There's nothing as motivating as a graph that shows your progress, no matter how slow that might be. There are many fitness-tracking packages available, the most notable of which is Weightmania Pro, which tracks your workouts, meals and measurements and is compatible with lots of different types of sporting activities. A five-user version costs \$50 (around £26) from www.weightmania.com.

If you are specifically interested in running, the Nike+iPod Sport Kit combination of running shoe and MP3 player could help. Not only can you relieve the monotony of running with music, but the iPod Nano music player also acts as a pedometer and stores your steps. When you sync it with your PC, you can upload this data and see how much faster you've become or how many calories you've burned. Apparently, Nike is

launching some athletic motivational content for the iPod soon, including workout mixes and playlists chosen by well-known athletes.

If you don't have a specific fitness technique in mind, why not go the whole hog and follow the Royal Marines' commando training schedule? You don't have to spend weeks at the Lympstone training camp. Focus Multimedia (www.focusmm.co.uk) sells a CD-ROM called Get Fit With The Royal Marines. For £8.99 including VAT, you can assess your current fitness level, keep a record of your training and (worryingly) read up on first aid. The disc is based on the 30-week commando training programme. Screaming staff sergeant and SA80 rifle not included. **CS**



▲ Experience the benefits of a Royal Marines fitness regime without the bullying

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